

**Statement to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions  
on “The Immediate and Long-Term Challenges Facing Public School Teachers: Low Pay,  
Teacher Shortages, and Underfunded Public Schools”**

## **Higher Pay Won’t Solve Teachers’ Problems**

We’ve made teaching “too hard for mere mortals.”

### **Robert Pondiscio**

Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

June 20, 2024

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and distinguished members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions: thank you for inviting me to testify today about the challenges faced by America’s classroom teachers. My name is Robert Pondiscio and I’m a senior fellow in education policy at the American Enterprise Institute. In 2002, I left the magazine business to become a 5<sup>th</sup> grade public school teacher in the South Bronx. I took a pay cut of greater than 80 percent to teach in the lowest-scoring school in New York City’s poorest-performing school district. I did so willingly, even proudly. I was not thinking about what I would make. I was thinking I would make a difference.

When I reflect on my time in the classroom, I don’t think about my paycheck, the staffing, or the per-pupil funding at my school, which seemed quite generous. Instead, I think about the impediments that stood—and still stand—in the way of teachers being successful.

Teaching is the easiest job in the world to do poorly, but the hardest one to do well. And make no mistake, the vast majority of our [four million full-time teachers](#) deeply want to do it well. So let me say at the outset that no one should begrudge paying hard-working teachers more, but we should be clear-eyed about our reasons for doing so. We work in the service of children. If our hope is that improving teacher pay will improve student outcomes, then we will likely be disappointed. Higher pay does not make a hard job easier to perform. It lifts no burden off a teacher’s shoulders, nor does it add hours to a teacher’s day.

I’d like to focus my testimony on a few of the factors that lead to teacher frustration and

burnout that higher pay, however well-intended, does not change. They include, but are not limited to, poor teacher preparation, deteriorating classroom conditions—specifically classroom disorder and disruption—shoddy curriculum, and increasingly the expectation that they will not just teach reading, math, or their subject areas effectively, but also play a quasi-therapeutic role in response to students' behavioral and mental health needs. We are asking teachers to do too many things to do any of them well at *any* salary.

A recent Pew Research Center survey [found](#) that 84 percent of American teachers feel there is not enough time during their regular work hours to get all of their work done; two-thirds (68 percent) feel their jobs are overwhelming.

Spend any time in a struggling school and you will soon see that common complaints miss the mark. They are not filled with incompetent, lazy, or indifferent teachers. In the main, struggling schools are filled with good people trying hard and failing. And, as often as not, they are failing not despite their training but *because* of it. Nor are they failing because schools are underfunded. The U.S. [spends](#) 38 percent more per students than the average of OECD member countries, and student achievement has remained static despite four decades of increased education spending.

Teachers are trying hard and failing because we have made the job literally too hard for mere mortals to do well.

Let's start with teacher training. [Nearly](#) half of new teachers leave the classroom within five years. And no wonder.

No profession sends its people to work more poorly prepared than education. A 2024 poll from the Pew Research Center [found](#) that only 36% of American teachers feel that they have "access to the resources they need to do their job." The same survey found that only one-third of American teachers feel satisfied with their training or opportunities to develop new skills.

The former head of the National Council on Teacher Quality, Kate Walsh, [said](#), "We treat the first-year teaching like it is some sorority or fraternity hazing. Educators expect a new teacher to be sick to her stomach every day at the thought of how she is going to survive the day just because that's what they once did. It's appalling!"

She's right. If we trained air-traffic controllers the way we train new teachers, we'd tell them that deadly crashes are just how you learn. We'd tell surgeons there's no substitute for hands-on experience, and not to worry: Their patient mortality rate will decline over time as they got

better and more confident.

As Kate Walsh implied, the idea that every teacher struggles in his or her first year is not merely accepted but celebrated. We tell war stories in the teachers' lounge about our disastrous first years in the classroom. And almost invariably the teachers who struggle the most are in front of the students who can afford it the least.

We must never forget that while a teacher is learning on the job, it's their students' only year in that grade. Students don't get a do-over when the teacher is unprepared and struggling. They only fall further behind.

A New York City teacher [described](#) in his memoir how two years of graduate school and six months of student teaching left him unprepared for the realities of the classroom. "I had taken courses in lesson planning, evaluation, psychology, and research," he said. "Next to nothing was said about what a first-year teacher most needs to know: how to control a classroom."

He described his ed school experience as—quote—"a mix of folk wisdom, psycho-jargon, wishful thinking, and out-and-out [BS]."

Why do good teachers leave the profession? Why do new teachers leave before they have time to reach classroom competence? It's not primarily the pay. Student behavior is out of control. It creates classroom conditions that are intolerable, makes it impossible to succeed, and drives people out of the classroom. Don't take my word for it: A 2022 poll from the National Education Association [showed](#) that almost half of all teachers report a desire or plan to quit because of school climate and safety. An EdWeek survey last year [found](#) that more than 70% of teachers report increases in disruptive behavior in the classroom since 2019. The same Pew study I mentioned earlier revealed that a shocking 40% of American teachers report having had students who were physically violent toward them.

Cade Brumley, Louisiana's State Superintendent of Education, [said](#) in a recent interview with the Independent Women's Forum, "Students who are habitually ungovernable should be removed from teachers' classrooms ... so teachers can actually teach and students can actually learn." It was refreshing to hear a state superintendent say that out loud, and to recognize that disruptive student behavior is classroom cancer. But attitudes like Brumley's are far too rare. Nearly every teacher has had the experience of asking for help with an unruly student and being asked what they did to trigger the disruption, or being told that students wouldn't act out if their lessons were more engaging.

Another example of how we make teachers' jobs needlessly difficult doesn't get a lot of

attention, but it should. It pertains to classroom content, to curriculum.

One RAND study [found](#) that nearly every teacher in America—99 percent of elementary teachers, 96 percent of secondary school teachers—draws upon "materials [they] developed and/or selected [themselves]" in teaching English language arts. The numbers are virtually the same for math. Nearly half of teachers in the study reported spending more than four hours per week creating or searching for instructional materials. New teachers spend the most, and at the time they should be developing and mastering their craft.

High-quality instructional materials—curriculum—should be non-negotiable and available to every teacher. Expecting them to find or create their own is like expecting a great actor to also be a great playwright, or asking a talented chef to also be the waiter and go grocery shopping the night before. Or perhaps moonlight as a farmer.

Time spent creating lessons from scratch or searching for materials on the Internet is time *not* spent analyzing student work, giving students feedback, building subject matter expertise, cultivating strong relationships with students and their parents—all of which are higher-yielding uses of teachers' time and energy. Worse, studies have [consistently demonstrated](#) the teacher-created lessons tend to be below standard and lacking in rigor—another drag on student outcomes.

One more example of the increasing demands placed on teachers is the rising emphasis on "social and emotional learning," or SEL. COVID disrupted the routines and rhythms of schooling for multiple school years. It had a discernible impact on student achievement, well-being, and mental health. This has only exacerbated the challenge faced by classroom teachers. SEL is an under-discussed change in the role of the teacher, from a pedagogue to something more closely resembling a therapist, social worker, or member of the clergy. The increased focus on SEL is a fundamental shift in teachers' responsibilities, forcing them into roles that they may embrace reluctantly (or not at all) and are unqualified or unsuited to play, with potential negative consequences for students.

As damaging to children as it might be for a teacher to perform poorly at teaching reading, math, or history, the effect of being a poor mental health counselor could be even more dire.

It is hardly ever the case that teachers are knowingly doing things that are unproductive. But as Dylan Wiliam [noted](#) in his 2016 book *Leadership for Teacher Learning*, Dylan Wiliam, "the essence of effective leadership is stopping people from doing good things to give them time to do even better things."

This insight deserves careful reflection among education leaders and policymakers alike. Decades of education policy have evinced unshakable faith that the way to raise student outcomes is to improve teacher quality, whether through training and certification, unlocking excellence through incentives, or by luring away the cognitive elite from better paying careers through some combination of higher pay or enhanced prestige. None of these strategies has been fruitful at scale, nor are they likely to be effective in the future.

The inconvenient fact is that the nation needs more than [4 million](#) people to teach our children. Any number that large means the men and women who staff our schools and teach our children will be, by definition, ordinary people—not saints, superstars or miracle workers.

In sum, there is a conceptual problem at the heart of our decades-long effort to improve student outcomes. We are seeking to raise and enhance the capacities of millions of teachers, while, at the same time, placing ever greater burdens on them. We have known for several decades that some teachers are [more effective](#) than others. But identifying what makes them so has proven elusive. No [consistent](#) or clear relationship has been found, for example, between teacher credentialing or certification exams and classroom effectiveness. If achievable, sustainable progress is our aim—and it must be our aim—we should endeavor to make the job one that can be done by the teachers we have, not the teachers we wish we had.

Once again—and emphatically—none of this is to suggest we shouldn't raise teacher pay. But there is no reason to expect that doing so will solve teacher shortages, or persuade good teachers to stay in the classroom.

Again, don't take my word for it. A 2023 RAND study [concluded](#) that “pay increases alone—without improvements in teachers' working hours or conditions—are unlikely to induce large shifts in teachers' well-being or intentions to leave.” The uncomfortable fact is we have made one of the most important and challenging jobs in America nearly impossible to do well.

Good teachers deserve our thanks, our praise, and to make a decent living. But more than this, they deserve to go home at the end of each day knowing they're making a difference.